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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003067

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USAID FOR AFR/EA HELLYER AND DALTON

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SUBJECT: THREATS AGAINST WORLD FOOD PROGRAM IN ETHIOPIA

Classified By: CDA Tulinabo Mushingi for Reasons 1.4 b/d.

1. (C) SUMMARY. World Food Program (WFP) officials in Ethiopia have reported to U.S. Mission officials that three threats have been communicated to WFP staff during December by individuals claiming to be members of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Each of the communications was a threat that if WFP failed to stop using Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) to deliver food aid, ONLF would take action against WFP staff and operations. In response, WFP has suspended operations in four areas of the Somali Region of Ethiopia, which translates to a 30 percent reduction in the distribution of food aid affecting 575,000 people. Involved WFP staff have been pulled back to the city of Jijiga where they will remain until January 15. Those staff report that the threats were the latest manifestation of an increasingly tense atmosphere in the region as ENDF and ONLF jousting brings each regularly into the proximity of WFP's operations. WFP has never requested ENDF escorts and often finds their Government of Ethiopia (GOE)-mandated presence to be counterproductive. WFP will re-evaluate the situation in mid-January and, in the meantime, will seek GOE intervention with ENDF and will also seek guidance from its New York headquarters. WFP senior officials in Ethiopia indicate they will continue to brief USAID Ethiopia officials on the situation in the Somali Region, but have expressly asked that the USG take no action at this time. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) In several conversations and one comprehensive meeting with several USAID Ethiopia staff, WFP Director and Deputy Director for Ethiopia (Strictly Protect Both) and other WFP staff reported three threats, one in New York and two in Ethiopia, from individuals claiming to be members of the ONLF. WFP tells us that the New York and first Ethiopia threats were delivered on December 14, the New York threat being against the United Nations generally and the Ethiopia threat specific to WFP. Both threats warned that continued use of ENDF escorts when delivering food aid in Ethiopia would lead to ONLF action against UN/WFP staff and operations. The New York threat reportedly was delivered by phone and the Ethiopia threat by an individual who stopped a WFP vehicle in the woreda of Warder (municipality equivalent) in Ethiopia's Somalia Region. WFP added that essentially the same threat was conveyed on December 18 when another WFP vehicle was stopped in Fik, also in the Somali Region.

3. (C) In response to these three threats, WFP has suspended operations, in whole or in part, in four Somalia Region woredas with heavy ONLF presence -- Fik, Warder, Degebur, and Korahe. WFP food is delivered to 575,000 people in those

locations. The suspension will continue until January 15, when it will be reassessed. In the meantime, affected WFP staff have been relocated to the city of Jijiga.

14. (C) More generally, WFP staff in Somali Region report a tense atmosphere over the past six months, with ENDF and quasi-independent local militias often insisting that food be unloaded at woreda capitals rather than at local food distribution points with the result that troops are able to take advantage of decreased WFP oversight to more aggressively divert the assistance and confiscate a cut for themselves. WFP reports that ONLF, probably in response to the heavy-handedness of the ENDF and militias, has also become more aggressive over the past three months. Previously, ONLF would stop unescorted WFP only to chat whereas more recently, as the December incidents illustrate, WFP staff may be ordered from their vehicles for questioning.

15. (C) WFP has for years believed that ENDF military escorts for WFP food deliveries are unnecessary to its efforts in Somali Region and are often counterproductive, even aside from their obvious recent provocation of the ONLF. For example, 60 food delivery trucks have been idle for the last few weeks for lack of available escorts. WFP finds this type of logistic bottleneck to be commonplace and compounded by issues of command-and-control and corruption. The GOE, however, insists on the escorts and has recently taken to expanding the area in which they are mandatory. WFP has asked its primary GOE interlocutor, the state minister for disaster management, to intervene to reduce the area in which escorts are required and to allow WFP to contract for security

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outside the ENDF. The minister has agreed to travel to the region to meet with military commanders.

16. (C) WFP is reluctant to discuss the recent threats directly with the ONLF and is seeking guidance from its UN headquarters in New York on next steps. NOTE: Although WFP senior officials in Ethiopia have been anxious to share information with USAID staff, they have strongly impressed on Post that they are not asking for USG intervention at this time. END NOTE.
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